

Roll Call, October 10, 2006

Out of every revolting scandal comes an opportunity for reform. As we come to grips with today's repulsive mess, part of our attention should be paid to an effort ensuring this never happens again. I believe that if we act soon, we can make changes to the House rules to ensure that America's House protects America's children.

Some have called for ending the page program. I disagree. The program inspired generations of young Americans to public service. Pages should not lose their opportunity to learn about self-government because the House could not govern itself.

Instead of ending the program, we can seize the opportunity to protect it and the children who join. At the heart of our effort should be a guiding principle: The rules of the House should be amended to ensure that Congress is the safest place in America for pages and interns to learn. By our example, we set the standard for every other institution in our country that offers opportunities to young Americans.

House reforms should first define an affirmative duty — owed by each Member and staffer — to protect minors in the temporary employ of the House. We should then define that duty as such:

Upon receipt of any credible evidence of the mistreatment of a minor in the temporary employ of the House, Members and staff must deliver such evidence immediately to both the Democratic and Republican heads of the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct.

Failure to report such evidence would also lead to reprimand, censure or expulsion under our rules. The reforms would call on the ethics committee to automatically launch an investigation, having 10 days to report and hold a vote on exoneration, reprimand censure or expulsion. The committee — the only one equally balanced in the House — could extend the investigation up to a maximum of 30 days on a two-thirds vote (i.e. both parties largely agreeing). Once the deadline is up, the committee would issue a report — to the American people — and deliver the matter to the House for a vote on an immediate privileged motion with a guaranteed recorded vote.

The standard of proof we should use should not be the criminal "beyond the shadow of a doubt" — that standard cannot fully defend the higher duty of care needed to defend the honor of the House. It should be based on our civil court standard — "more likely than not" that the abuse occurred. I would argue that if the ethics committee found that it was "more likely than not" that a Member violated a duty to protect a minor, goodbye, sayonara, adios to that Member.

Under my proposal, Members and staff will be on notice that credible evidence of totally inappropriate behavior will be reported immediately to Members of both political parties. That increases the stakes enormously in such cases but is warranted in the defense of a child.

The procedures set forth would guarantee that within 11 days of receiving credible evidence of a minor's mistreatment, the House would be voting on the punishment of the responsible adult.

Additionally, my plan calls for the House Page Board to be co-chaired by former Members of Congress in good standing — one Democrat and one Republican confirmed by a vote from the ethics committee. Such Members who are well respected and confirmed are no longer subject to as much partisan pressure as they were in elected office. Their duties should be clearly defined: 1) to the safety of children, 2) to informing their parents and 3) to the long-term integrity of the House as a respected institution.

When Congress reconvenes, the reform of our rules should be our first order of business. Parents around the country are looking for us to lead. If we rise to this occasion, we can knit a silver lining of reform around the cloud that hovers over the People's House.